Communication Management for Large Modules

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INTRODUCTION

This article addresses issues concerning the suitability of particular media as mass communication tools in an UK higher education setting. It looks firstly at the use of e-mail as a communication method whilst managing large modules. The article then goes on to examine the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to provide a mass communication method more suited to the needs of both the staff and the students.

An in-depth case study will look at how a large module is managed through the use of a Virtual Learning Environment, discussing the pros and cons of using such technology. For the purposes of this article, distance learning will not be considered, as the university in question has no plans to follow or adopt such an approach for the courses that undertake these modules.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The University of Westminster is a large, modern university operating on four sites across the centre of London and West London. It was Britain's first polytechnic, established in 1838 in Regent Street, and it still uses these original buildings for lectures and seminars. It became a university in 1992 and is now recognised in the *Financial Times* annual survey as the top English 'new' university.

The university has a population of both full-time and part-time students drawn from the local surrounding areas, but also has a large population of international students. Many of these students are studying post-graduate or post-experience/professional updating courses.

The Westminster Business School operates out of the Marylebone campus, which is situated close to Regents Park and is thus a very popular location for students to attend courses, as not only is it in the centre of London, but is also easily accessible by public transport.

COMMUNICATION MEDIA

This section discusses the theoretical background to communication studies looking at 'fitness for purpose' for the media.

To begin, a brief overview of the communication process and its constituents would be useful. A basic theoretical model of the communication process states that messages are 'sent' and 'received', confirmation of receipt and interpretation of the message indicates that it is a two-way communication process (Warner, 1996). The efficiency of this process is subject to a variety of issues such as:

- *Effectiveness:* How do we measure this when using e-mail or a Web site?
- *Simultaneous reception of information by recipients:* The information is available simultaneously, but how do we measure if students have accessed it?
- *Acknowledgement of receipt:* With e-mail, a receipt can be provided, but how is this addressed using a Web site?
- *Speed:* How quickly does the information reach the recipients?
- *Cost of the process:* Is it cost effective?

All of these factors will be considered in the case study section of the article.

It can be said that one of the major benefits of the growth in the use of the Internet has been the ability to communicate using e-mail as a medium. E-mail is still the most regularly used aspect of the Internet, and the level of usage is growing. Sands (2003) argues that e-mail is now as accepted a communication method as the telephone within just a few years of its introduction. E-mail has become a common mode of communication for many people, though exceptions must be made for those who do not have easy and regular access to the technology required. Adequate access to the technology is assumed

in this article. However, communications theorists argue there are problems with the use of e-mail as the sole communication medium. Culnan and Markus (1987) suggested that a lack of face-to-face communication changes the intra- and interpersonal variables because of a lack of social context. Sproull and Kiesler (1986) argued that e-mail was devoid of social cues, and this would seriously affect communication patterns. E-mail provides neither audible nor visible cues to the communication process and as such can be seen as a relatively impoverished communication style. Hirschheim (1985) argued that one of the major benefits of using e-mail is to support communication between people who are geographically distant. This leads us to the initial premise that although widely utilised, there are significant problems with the use of e-mail as the sole communication medium.

There are further problems with an e-mail system in that it is not always possible to ensure that the recipient has received and read the message in an appropriate timeframe. This may be caused by a variety of problems, both technical and human. These issues are discussed in more detail and possible solutions posited in Willis and Coakes (2000).

Further analysis of the current situation indicates that e-mail lacks the collaborative dimension that is needed in today's world. In an academic setting, the ability to discuss matters in 'real time', rather than waiting for a reply from a tutor via an e-mail system, may be of great importance.

IS E-MAIL A SUITABLE MASS COMMUNICATION MEDIUM?

A traditional view of the mass communication process would have the university providing content and it passing to the students via the e-mail medium as shown in Figure 1.

This model allows no interaction. We posit that what is required in the modern communication environment is a more interactive model which allows students to influence the content, as well as be recipients of, information. In our article, the aim of mass communication is to provide information simultaneously to a large number of students. We have to seriously question whether e-mail is the correct option given the problems outlined.

Further analysis leads us to the model suggested below which, while offering limited interaction, we feel is likely to be more effective and more satisfactory than the traditional model outlined above.

The model outlined as Figure 2 gives students the option of simply gaining information via the medium, or engaging and interacting with it by influencing the content. From the preceding arguments, it is doubtful that e-mail can fulfil the role of the appropriate medium in the new model, so an alternative has to be found.

The ability to interact is an aspect that has acquired great importance in the communication process, and a method must be found that does not have the weaknesses of e-mail. What is required is a medium that can have input from both staff and students, and which can change rapidly to respond to these needs. As the staff and students are already familiar with e-mail and the Internet, a move to a more directly Web-based approach using a VLE is likely to provide a viable solution. This is supported by the fact that students have better access to Web sites and are more used to using this medium now than in the past. Additionally, many organisations limit the size of e-mails that can be sent across the network, which can cause real problems when disseminating large amounts of information, which can cause issues with part-time students who use their workplace e-mail systems for their prime communication access. The authors feel the use of a Web site accessible from any location and requiring only a browser offers a realistic alternative.

In terms of the ability to interact, asking students to access a Web site is not necessarily more effective than the simple use of e-mail - it is the add-ons of lecture notes, seminar notes, and feedback that will make the medium more successful.

Figure 1. A traditional mass communication model
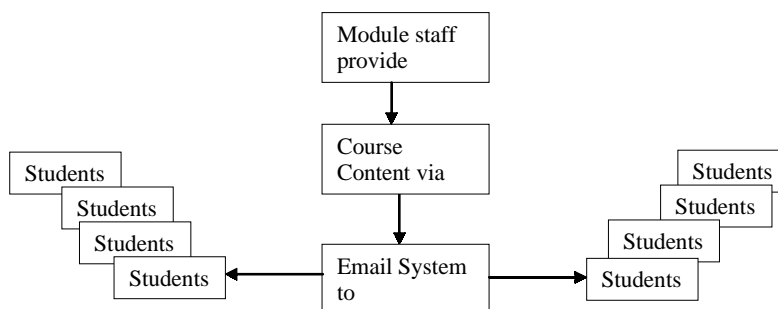
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